

# Albertus Magnus en het begrip 'een'

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The life and works of Albertus Magnus (1200 – 1280) cover the main part of the 13th century, which saw the start of a university/academic era, in which Albertus played a prominent role; this is expressed in Albertus' commentaries on the writings of pseudo-Dionysius and the writings of Aristotle, as well as in his *Summa Theologiae*. Albertus joined the Dominican Order, and he already became very famous owing to his scholarly excellence. He also became known for other skills, which led the ecclesiastical authorities and certain worldly parties to call on him to preach for the crusade, to take on the role of bishop, to carry out administrative roles within his order, and to act as a mediator; roles which he performed with excellence.

However, he appears to have fulfilled his more practical tasks mainly out of a sense of duty, as they distracted him from his academic work. That academic work shows his impressive productivity; it is impressive not only in the sheer quantity of his writings, but also in their diversity. One need only consider the large number of commentaries on writings from the philosophical tradition, ranging from Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* to the whole oeuvre of pseudo-Dionysius; his range of commentaries on all of the works of Aristotle that were available to him at the time deserve special attention. In writing these commentaries he dealt with the full range of academic pursuits that had been introduced by Aristotle in particular, from botany to metaphysics and from logic to ethics. It was especially through his work in the natural sciences that he received acclaim (in the Catholic church he has later been nominated as the patron saint of the natural sciences); his excellence in those fields showed how he, unlike his contemporaries, was not satisfied with merely commenting on writings within the natural sciences, but also examined the subjects that were discussed in the actual world outside of his study.

In his own time, Albertus was already, unjustly, seen as a kind of encyclopedist, lacking a unique philosophy of his own. That image may have arisen from his style of commentary-writing, in which he presented a wide range of sources, in fact all the sources he had knowledge of, for each subject that he discussed; this made it in most cases hard to discern his own positions regarding those subjects. However, he did develop his own line of thought, at least regarding the topics discussed in this thesis.

This research brings to light Albertus' own perspective to the concept of "one" as featured in the commentary on pseudo-Dionysius' *On the Divine Names*, the commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Albertus' own *Summa Theologiae*. These writings have been chosen for this study because they contain important treatises on the concept "one". They are discussed in their chronological order, in light of developments of the thoughts of Albertus. Besides these writings, the study also comprises, to a minor degree, the commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and the commentary on the *Book of Causes*.

For Albertus and other mediaeval philosophers, the concept "one" was a central notion. It indicated the indivisibility of what is a "being". This can be gathered from Albertus' definition of "one": "undivided in itself and divided (set apart) from other things". This definition appears to have been designed by Albertus and used by him for the first time. This definition refers back to Aristotle's understanding of "one" as "indivisible" ("adiairetos"; literally: "cannot be taken apart"). In this way Albertus interprets Aristotle's notion of "undividedness" as not only meaning the undividedness of the singular being, but also as indicating that the singular being exists alongside other beings. Albertus then takes a next step by interpreting the undividedness of the being in terms of participation of the first principle of reality, which is regarded as "one" in the most absolute sense (which is connected with how Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* had written about the forms of "one" as being the case to a higher or lesser degree). This indicates that "one" for him also means "to a higher or lesser degree being able to unite". This unifying originates from the act of the forma, which gives the unicity of the being, while also providing its delimitation.

Albertus deals with “one” as expressed in various appearances or forms throughout his discussion of his sources. He mainly bases himself on the forms found in book Delta, and to a lesser degree on those in book Iota, of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, viz. “continuum”, “kind”/“forma”, “genus”, “matter” and “definition”. They return in his other writings and constitute the startingpoint of Albertus’ discussion of all the aspects of the notion “one”.

We can distinguish five aspects that play a role in his accounts of the notion ‘one’:

1. To begin with, there is the relationship between “one” and “being”. For Albert the terms “one” and “being” are interchangeable, in the sense that they always refer to the same entities, as they result together from the act of the forma. That does not mean that the two terms are synonymous, because their interchangeability indicates only that they refer to the same beings (supposita), not so much to their meaning (intentio). It is true that they signify the same intentio, but they do so each in their unique “way of signifying” (“modus significandi”); that way is for “being” the realisation of what is expressed by the forma and for “one” the delimitation of what is realised out of the forma. “Being” and “one” are general, “first”, concepts, like the concepts “true” and “good”, which also have their unique ways of signifying.

2. Through the act of the forma a specific being comes to be, a being that can also function as measure for similar beings, which is what Aristotle had called the primary meaning of “one”. In Aristotle and Albertus, “measure” is in first instance applicable to discrete quantity. This means that the singular discrete being acts as a measure for other beings of the same kind. Measuring is not done by the forma of a specific kind, but by the singular being that expresses that forma. But “measure” can also be applied to what is not a discrete quantity, as is the case when units, such as measures for length or weight, are imposed on non-discrete quantity. Then they are imposed on continuities as if those were consisting of discrete beings, such as when we apply “mile” to continuous distance. In both ways, “one” as “measure”, especially when it is applied to discrete quantity, but also when imposed on non-discrete quantities, plays an important role in generating knowledge.

3. “One” also is the principle of number (without being a number itself). This is explained by Albertus through a distinction he adopted from Averroes, between an extrinsic and an intrinsic principle of number. On the one hand we can see “one” as the undividedness of the singular being – any being –, which is extrinsic to any specific determination of the being, and on the other hand we can see “one” as specified and belonging to a particular kind. In this way Albertus, following Aristotle and Boethius, sees undividedness as the basis for the generation of numbers. In the *Summa Theologiae* he speaks of “distinction” as the basis for the generating of numbers, by which he stays in the same line of thought as Aristotle and Boethius: through its undividedness the being can be distinguished from other beings and these can be counted with it. This happens especially with the intrinsic meaning of “one” as the principle of number.

Concerning the status of numbers we can see some development in Albertus’ thought. While early on, in the commentary on *On the Divine Names*, he allowed number to have its own identity (its “whatness”), later, in the commentary on the *Metaphysics*, he adhered to the perspective of Aristotle, denying such specific identity for each number and identifying number as a collection of units; in other words, there is not, for instance, something like “twentyess”, but rather a twentyfold collection of units.

4. Ever since the *Parmenides* of Plato and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, “one” has consistently been understood to relate to “many”, in the sense that what is “one”, in general presents itself amongst a plurality of other, similar and dissimilar, beings. For this reason, the opposition to “many” is a recurring aspect of “one”. In adherence to Aristotle, Albertus makes a distinction between two forms of that opposition: on the one hand it is the opposition between “undivided” and “divided”, while on the other hand it is the opposition between “measure” and “measured”. These two forms show two different kinds of opposition. Albertus devotes most of his attention to the opposition between “undivided” and “divided”,

which he regards as the more fundamental opposition between “one” and “many”; the opposition between “measure” and “measured” he regards as an opposition “in a manner of speaking” (*Summa Theologiae*), which has a more limited significance, as it is only applicable to the quantitative (even though also for him measuring can be applied to what is not quantitative as such, but a quality applied to what is quantitative, such as when we call something “heavy” and then measure that). The opposition between “undivided” and “divided” had already been determined by Aristotle as the opposition of “privatio” and “habitus”, determining plurality to be the natural state (habitus) and ‘one’ as its negation (privatio). Albertus, however, shows some development on this subject. In the commentary on *On the Divine Names* he stated that this opposition depends on the nature of what is “undivided” or “divided”; if that nature consists in unifying, then “undividedness” is the “habitus” (while “dividedness” is the privatio), but if that nature consists in division, then “dividedness” is the habitus (and “undividedness” the privatio). In the commentary on the *Metaphysics* he shows a different line of reasoning. There he argues that when one looks at the terms “undivided” and “divided”, then “divided” will be the habitus; after all, one first has to assume something before denying it with “un-”. However when one looks at the very nature of what is opposed, Albertus argues, then the realised (singular) nature has to come first as the habitus in opposition to plurality (privatio). In the *Summa Theologiae* he offers yet another perspective, although comparable, from which he argues that “one” can also be regarded as a habitus. His reasoning there is that the result from the act of the forma should be seen as the natural state (habitus), while “many” is seen as its negation (privatio).

5. Albertus has various reasons for discussing the relationships between the concept “one” and the divine. One such reason is that the definition “undivided in itself and divided (set apart) from other things” pertains to what is to a certain degree able to unify, as we see in the *Summa Theologiae*, where he places the forms of “one” in a ranking based on that criterion. The highest degree of that ranking is the first principle, which is the absolute “One” and the cause of all unity. Hence “One” is an important divine name. As to the participation of all beings to the first principle that is “One”, Albertus developed a specific type of analogy: the analogon is in the divine unity, and beings are called “one” in reference to that divine unity.

Regarding the divine unity, specific attention has to be paid to the Trinity. The persons in the Trinity refer, according to Albertus, to the unity of the Divine essence as separate “operations” of it, distinguished only as relationships to the essence and not in any material sense. Another specific issue concerning the divine unity is the unity of the divine and human nature in one of the Persons of the Trinity, Christ. Albertus considers that unity as “less perfect” than the unity of the Divine essence, which is the strongest in its power to unify. He considers the unity in Christ of human nature and divine nature as a unity by addition, which is less strong in its unifying power. We see this explanation offered by Albertus throughout his writings.

Through his work, Albertus Magnus managed to make his own contribution to a long and rich tradition in philosophy, where he easily found his inspiration. That tradition consists primarily of the traditions Neoplatonism and from the 12/13<sup>th</sup> century of Aristotelianism, which Albertus saw as entwined. Albertus aimed to make all of the writings of Aristotle accessible to his contemporaries, because he recognised the great value of Aristotle’s academic accomplishments. But he refused to slavishly follow Aristotle, by advocating a critical and rational approach to his teachings. However, an adequate understanding of his appreciation of Aristotle is not only complicated by this critical stance, but also by the fact that he understood Aristotle’s teachings as combined with Neoplatonist ideas, in part because he, mistakenly, considered the *Book of Causes* – Neoplatonist and based on Proklos – to have been written by Aristotle, or at least as originating from Aristotle’s tradition. What may also have played a role in the development of Albertus’ own “Neoplatonic Aristotelianism” (De Libera), is that he applied the Aristotelian conceptual framework to theological themes, which were more

based on a Neoplatonic perspective, in line with the dominant perspective in academia before the full reception of Aristotelian thought.

Albertus was one of the first scholars in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to study the writings and ideas of Avicenna and Averroes. He would continue to do so throughout his life, partly because of his involvement with debates that were fed by their ideas, especially Averroes. In studying their ideas he may have suffered from some confusion, as their original writings (in Latin translation) were not always available to him. Albertus, for instance, concurred with Averroes' criticism of Avicenna, while he probably only knew the subject of criticism from the description given by Averroes and not from the actual writings of Avicenna. In relation to the concept of "One", the issue was mainly the accusation uttered by Averroes that Avicenna had ignored the distinction between an intrinsic and an extrinsic principle of number. As is shown by recent research, this was a misunderstanding. But Albertus also expressed criticism on ideas of Averroes, for example with regard to the latter's notion of "measure", as he attributed to Averroes "and his followers" the position that the first unmoved mover would function as the measure of beings; he offered Aristotle's and his own position as the better point of view: the undivided being within a specific kind or genus has to be the measure for that kind or genus.

The traditional image of the relationship between Albertus and Thomas Aquinas has in recent years been corrected by several scholars. It has now become apparent that characterising Albertus as "the teacher of Thomas Aquinas" needs to be adjusted. It is not disputed that Aquinas was for several years amongst Albertus' students. It is not entirely clear, however, what influence Albertus may have had on Aquinas, apart from the apparent fact that the definition of "one" coined by Albertus – "undivided in itself and divided (set apart) from other things" – was adopted by Aquinas and that Aquinas' commentary on the *Sentences*, which was written around the time when Aquinas studied with Albertus, contains a text that is very similar to what we find in Albertus. A further similarity can be seen in the fact that both philosophers made use of the so-called nugatio-argument, aimed at denying synonymity in the relationship between the terms "being" and "one". But beyond that there are also clear differences between the two, to such an extent that it would seem that after the few years they had spent together they went in different directions. A further indication of this separation can be gathered from the fact that Albertus continued to associate the *Book of Causes* with Aristotle and his tradition, after Aquinas had already shown that it had originated from the writings of Proklos, as can be seen in references in his last work, the *Summa Theologiae*.

It has become clear that the choice to give this dissertation a historical and not a systematical structure was correct. The assumption leading up to that choice, i.e., that there had been some development in Albertus' thoughts on the concept "one", has been proved through the analysis of the texts as presented in this thesis. That development can be seen not only in his ideas on the status of number, but also in his thoughts on the relationship between "being" and "one" (in his early work he wrote about a threefold act of the forma, while in his later work he used a two-fold act of the forma), in his views on the relationships between the four most general terms, and in his attitude towards the ideas of Avicenna and Averroes.

The development in the thought of Albertus goes hand in hand with elements of his thought that remained unchanged. Such an element is found in the definition of "one" as "undivided in itself and divided (set apart) from other things", which can be found throughout Albertus' writings. Another stable element is his agreement with Averroes' criticism of Avicenna. Also stable is his emphasis on the role of the forma, as becomes apparent from his theory about the relationship between "being" and "one" as resulting from the act of the forma. Another constant element can be found in the style Albertus used for his academic writings. That style is characterised by a combination of paraphrases and inserted texts ("digressionones") and by the offering of overviews of a multitude of relevant sources.